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2018-02

Kramer , M 2018 , ' Promoting teachers' agency : reflective practice as transformative disposition ' , Reflective Practice , vol. 19 , no. 2 , pp. 211-224 . <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2018.1437405>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/304736>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2018.1437405>

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Promoting teachers' agency: Reflective practice as transformative disposition

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Promoting teachers' agency: Reflective practice as transformative disposition

Reflective practice has been criticised for having become a standardised method in teacher education and on-the-job training, oftentimes following routines that more likely turn out to be self-affirming than to actually foster change. Also, reflective practice is still widely understood as an individual process. Both aspects are considered problematic and are addressed by employing an activity-theoretical approach that is suggested to be essentially compatible with an existentialist perspective on reflective practice as offered by Thompson and Pascal (2011). Utilising the theory of expansive learning, formative interventionist methodology is proposed to provide a robust framework for developing collaborative and critical reflective practice, which in turn reveals the transformative potential of teachers' agency, as illustrated by a study accompanying and supporting the development of an Austrian secondary school.

Keywords: reflective practice, transformative agency, cultural-historical activity theory, expansive learning

1. Introduction

Reflective practice is supposed to positively affect teachers' agency, expanding their scope of action and opening up perspectives for professional development. However, it has repeatedly been subject to criticism for having a tendency to 'contradict its own aims and become non-reflective, shutting off possibilities for transformation' (Galea, 2012, p. 245), and for having become a term overused to the point of having lost its meaning (Hébert, 2015, p. 370). At the same time, reflective practice is – at least implicitly – still widely understood as an individual process (Collin & Karsenti, 2011) with few exceptions, e.g. Farrell (2014), or Stuart (2014). These aspects present serious limitations to the potential of reflective practice for promoting collective transformative agency, and therefore need to be addressed.

In the present paper, I suggest approaching reflective practice as a specific *learning mode* – both individually and collectively – that empowers learners to transform their situation. In this I follow the *theory of expansive learning* (Y. Engeström, 2015), which draws from cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and its examples of using formative interventionist methodology. This article also seeks to contribute to a more elaborated understanding and

conceptualisation of reflective practice in the CHAT tradition. For opening up more deeply reflectivity as an internal part of activity, I follow Thompson and Pascal (2011, 2012) who provide a theoretical framework for reflective practice that is based on existentialist core assumptions. I propose this framework to be essentially compatible with and practically addressable through the theory of expansive learning, which on its part fosters the emergence of transformative agency. Concerning both approaches, however, I argue in this paper that they do not pay attention to the psychological aspect constituting an internal part of reflective practice. I refer to existentialist need dimensions expressing the motivational aspect of human activity, as discussed by Leontiev (2012). While adding this aspect to the existentialist framework, I aim to build a framework of *collaborative reflective practice with a transformative disposition*.

The article is structured as follows: I first turn towards theorising reflective practice from a CHAT perspective and propose the addition of existentialist need dimensions into the framework. Secondly, a case study capitalising on this framework for studying reflective practice in the field of education is provided. By applying formative interventionist methodology in the form of a locally adapted version of the Change Laboratory, an expansive learning method, at an Austrian secondary school, I seek to answer the following question: How can reflective practice be conceived as something that extends beyond the individual teacher and incites teachers to commit to both individual and collective professional development in an educational setting?

2. Theorising reflective practice

In their quest to provide a theoretical framework for a reflective practice that opens up opportunities to transform a situation rather than to be reluctant to change, Thompson and Pascal (2011) build on six existentialist key concepts and propose that reflective practice should (i) be critical of essentialism; (ii) perceive human existence as fundamentally social; (iii) be suspicious of truth and struggle for meaning; (iv) reject any attempt to hide behind the unconscious; (v) view the dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity as basis of social reality; and (vi) understand the present as being shaped (though not determined) by the past and by the future. Table 1

provides an overview and juxtaposes each of these positions with a CHAT point of view.

Table 1. Existentialist framework for reflective practice, juxtaposed with a CHAT perspective

	Existentialist theoretical framework for reflective practice	CHAT perspective
Critique of essentialism	People are not fixed identities but struggle for a balance between ontological security and inevitable incoherence. Reflective practice is seen as matter of <i>opening up</i> the range of possibilities.	Distinction between stability and possibility knowledge (Y. Engeström, 2007), which are both necessary and fundamental for developing transformative agency. Central notion of ‘breaking away and opening up’ (Y. Engeström, 1996).
Being-in-the-world	Reflection is shaped by <i>sedimented meanings of culture</i> .	The very capability for reflection is shaped and mediated by culture, and in turn also opens up ways to shape it. Double stimulation as key principle.
Phenomenology	Meaning is found by making sense of the range of complexities involved.	The <i>object of activity</i> as meaning-giving sense-maker (Kaptelinin, 2005, p. 5).
Rejecting the unconscious	Preconscious material can actively be made conscious: Consciousness as a matter of focus.	Historical and empirical analyses as expansive learning actions. Finding the abstract germ cell, movement towards a new concrete (Davydov & Kilpatrick, 1990, pp. 128–138) as key principle to draw things before the curtain.
Dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity	Social reality is interpreted as dialectical interaction between a subjective and an objective pole.	Individual mind, social and material world are dialectically and dialogically related and constitute each other (Vygotsky, 1978; Levitin, 1982; Bakhurst et al., 1995).
Progressive-regressive method	The present is seen as being shaped (not determined) by the past and the future. Notion of ‘reflection <i>for</i> future’.	Expansive learning actions of modelling new solutions based on historical and empirical analyses and on a newly defined object/motive.

(i) Critique of essentialism

One basic assumption of existentialism is that people are not to be defined as fixed entities.

Rather, ‘human existence is characterized by flux’ (Thompson & Pascal, 2011, p. 16). People maintain ontological security by ‘a more or less managed process of self-creation based on the interaction of choices (human agency) and the social context in which such agency occurs (culture and structure)’ (ibid.). The focus of reflective practice should be on ‘opening up’ the range of possibilities instead of finding an underlying ‘truth’ of the situation, which would rather have to be described as ‘closure’ (p. 20). Instead of presenting a static picture, detached of any situation, reflective practice is a sophisticated, dynamic and situated ‘process of integrating personal and professional knowledge with the demands of the situation as part of an intelligent and creative approach to practice’ (ibid.).

Y. Engeström (2007, p. 271) suggests addressing knowledge from the point of view of its uses, and proposes the distinction between *stability* and *possibility* knowledge, the former being ‘constructed to freeze and simplify a constantly shifting or otherwise bewildering reality’, which as such is useful for grasping an object and to bring it into focus. This kind of knowledge does not suffice, though. It needs to be complemented with possibility knowledge, which emerges when objects are in constant movement and cannot be grasped easily. Such knowledge emerges ‘when objects are represented in fields with the help of which one can depict meanings in movement and transformation’ (ibid.).

In terms of reflective practice, this means a focus on the range of possibilities, on the notion of ‘breaking away and opening up’ (Y. Engeström, 1996) is at least as important as stability knowledge, which, if left on its own, is always at risk of stigmatising both humans and things (see Y. Engeström, 2007, p. 271). It may even turn out to be helpful to intentionally destabilise categorical knowledge and turn it into possibility knowledge (p. 272).

(ii) Being-in-the-world

Existentialism understands human existence to be fundamentally social in that individuals need to be seen as being ‘located in the wider social context of being-in-the-world’ (Thompson & Pascal, 2011, p. 17). Personal reflection is therefore ‘part of the broader context of cultural formations and structural relations’ (ibid.) and cannot be understood without it. The authors refer to Sartre, who in his later work revealed a deepened understanding of this fact by changing his initial ‘I am what I make myself’ to ‘I am what I make of what is made of me’. An individual cannot be understood detached from any social context. Rather, the focus needs to be on their mutual relationship, on how they feed back on, and even constitute, each other.

Reflective practice should therefore not only focus on the individual experience, but view it as thoroughly situated. It needs to be understood as embedded in the wider cultural and social context from which it cannot be easily detached. Be it individual or collective reflective practice with respect to its *form*, it is always social (Kaptelinin, 2005, p. 9). By providing distinct cultural

tools and conceptual lenses, this wider cultural and social context determines not only *what* I see but also *the way* I see it: The very capability for reflection as such is shaped and mediated by culture. On the other hand, the deliberate acquisition, choice and use of cultural tools and signs allows the subject to act on both the external world and the self, to transform both a given practice as well as the way it is reflected on. Both aspects are equally important, and one needs to be aware of both.

Especially the sign-mediated controlling of one's behaviour, Vygotsky's method of *double stimulation* (1978, pp. 56–57) is of interest here. The first stimulus depicts the problematic situation, or, as in our case, the practice that is reflected on. The second stimulus is a specific sign, a deliberately chosen conceptual lens, a cultural artefact, which is employed as a means for reflection and by which 'the subject gains control of his or her action and constructs a new understanding of the initial problem' (Y. Engeström, Sannino, & Virkkunen, 2014, p. 121). As such, the method of double stimulation may even be considered the very starting point, or germ cell, of reflective practice. It is of crucial importance to be aware of what is chosen and employed as second stimulus, as we cannot look at and reflect on a situation detached from any such second stimulus, as will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.

(iii) Phenomenology

Phenomenology is concerned with processes of meaning making – the way we make sense of reality as it is presented to us. Instead of passively accepting reality as something given to us in an absolute sense, it is characterised by continuous individual and collective effort of meaning making: 'Learning is therefore not a passive process of "discovering" the truth. Rather, it is a struggle to develop a set of meanings that help us make sense of the world as it is presented to us' (Thompson & Pascal, 2011, p. 18).

A critical feature of reflective practice is therefore being suspicious of truth, especially of truth that presents itself as easily accessible and overly simplified. Instead, it is a struggle for 'finding meaning by making sense of the range of complexities involved' (Thompson & Pascal,

2011, p. 20). It is important not to neglect the collective dimension here, as a meaningful understanding of challenging situations encountered in practice ‘does not arise from individual perception alone, but also from the existential-phenomenological concept of being-in-the-world of practice’ (ibid.). A reflective understanding of a situation needs to build on the perceptions of everyone involved, and leads to a collective negotiating of meaning.

From the point of view of activity theory, the process of meaning making is tightly linked to the *object* of the activity which serves as a crucial link between fundamentally inseparable (since mutually constituting) subjective and objective phenomena and can be defined as its ‘sense-maker’ (Kaptelinin, 2005, p. 5). Thus, identifying an object of activity and tracing its development over time can ‘serve as a basis for reaching a deeper and more structured understanding of otherwise fragmented pieces of evidence’ (ibid.).

(iv) The rejection of the unconscious

Another existentialist key position holds that ‘there is no justification for a mysterious domain of the “unconscious”, as we are always tacitly aware of what we are doing’ (Bowring, 2000, p. 17). The ‘spotlight’ of consciousness is viewed as establishing foreground and background. Prereflective material can be focused on and thus be drawn in front of the curtain, made conscious and accessible for reflection. This entails two steps: First, a conscious becoming aware of, concretising, and naming, such material; and second, a close examination and analysis of it.

In the theory of expansive learning, concrete *learning actions* aim at the transformation of the whole given activity system, including all its constituents. The first learning action, *questioning*, seeks to make explicit the situation, especially any problematic aspects about it – the *need state*. Instead of remaining unclear and nebulous, or even ascribing it to the domain of the unconscious, the problem needs to be verbalised and pinned down. This leads to, and goes hand in hand with, the second learning action of *analysing* the situation both empirically and historically, in the course of which the phenomenon is tried to be grasped from the point of view of its development and origin by disclosing its *genesis*, its *causal dynamic basis* (Vygotsky,

1978, p. 62) in order to find its abstract *germ cell*, which ‘captures the smallest and simplest, genetically primary unit of the whole functionally interconnected system under scrutiny’ (Y. Engeström et al., 2014, p. 122). Thus, what might otherwise have remained in a prereflective stage, is not only drawn in front of the curtain, but thoroughly analysed in a way that unveils the essence of a given phenomenon. Such analysis characterises the second key principle of the theory of expansive learning: A dialectical movement of thinking that is depicted as the *ascent from the abstract to the concrete*, which ‘starts from the real concrete (the world as it presents itself to us) and proceeds through abstraction (separating from this whole the unit with which we think about it) to the thought concrete (the reconstituted and now understood whole)’ (ibid.).

(v) The dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity

A further key element of existentialist thought is the dialectic relation between an acting subject and the objective world, ‘[r]ecognising the significant interactions between the phenomenological base in terms of the key role of perception and meaning making as active processes (the subjective pole) and the wider social and material context in which our meanings are constructed and acted upon (the objective pole)’ (Thompson & Pascal, 2011, p. 19). The world acts upon us just as we act upon the world – subject and objective world constitute each other. This means that we, while not free from social restraint, are still not prisoners of our environment and our social circumstances but can actively transform and transcend them. This dialectic of subjectivity and objectivity lies at the core of CHAT, which postulates on the one hand the sign-mediated social formation of the mind (Vygotsky, 1978; Levitin, 1982; Bakhurst et al., 1995), and on the other the tool-mediated transformation of the objective world by acting subjects.

Of course, this dialectic relation between an acting subject and the objective world simultaneously opens up a dialogical relation, as one *cannot not communicate* (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 2011, p. 29), also acknowledging the fact that the acting subject at the same time *is part of* the objective world.

(vi) *The progressive-regressive method*

An oversimplified one-dimensional approach to reflective practice has the tendency to focus exclusively on the here and now. Existentialism has a wider perspective. It recognises that present circumstances are shaped in part by the past – how we perceive this past and the meaning we attach to it, rather than seeing it in a fixed, deterministic sense – and also by the future in terms of what is known as ‘intentionality’. Key features of reflective practice would thus be a deepened understanding of how the past shapes, though not determines, the present, as well as its being informed by a future perspective, by a ‘movement towards being’. As Thompson and Pascal (2011, pp. 23–24) cite Simone de Beauvoir: “‘Man [sic] has to fashion what he will be. He continuously seeks to create himself, and this is what we call his project, [...] a movement towards being. Man accomplishes things so as to be (p. 300 [sic], cited in Mahon, 1997, p. 9)’”.

In their quest to move beyond Schön’s (1983) conceptualisation of reflection, and his notions of *reflection in action* and *reflection on action*, Thompson and Pascal (2012, p. 317) additionally propose reflection *for* action, thus including the aspect of intentionality and forethought. In the theory of expansive learning, the corresponding learning action is that of *modelling* a new solution that is informed by thorough empirical and historical analyses of the activity, and that seeks to overcome its inherent contradictions, and thus to transform the activity.

3. Adding existential need dimensions

In the CHAT tradition, the theory of expansive learning has concentrated on adding the third component of the relation between subject and object, namely, community and its respective mediators, such as rules and division of labour (Kaptelinin, 2005) (see Figure 1). Concerning reflective practice, my intent is to make more visible the relation between needs and activity that turns the focus on the theory of human motivation in object-oriented activity. Leontiev (2012) offers an important contribution here that I suggest to be integrated into the presented framework. He discusses existential need dimensions as *existential imperatives to human behaviour* (Leontiev, 2012, p. vii). After providing an overview of explanatory models of human

motivation in the last century, he outlines an integrative model that builds on the ideas of Fromm, Nuttin, Maddi, Diligenski, and Deci and Ryan (Leontiev, 2012. p. 21). This model identifies needs on a biological, a social and a personal level of existence. To Leontiev, while ‘distinguishing separate single needs is a deliberate construction, a matter of convention and convenience’ (ibid.), it does make sense to speak of *metanecessities* that are inherent in each level of human existence. Leontiev especially addresses the basic psychological needs of *competence, relatedness* and *autonomy*, as posited by Deci and Ryan (2000) in their theory of self-determination (SDT), and concludes that

‘it is difficult to overestimate the contribution of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000): all the three basic needs postulated by SDT refer to the metanecessities described above. Indeed, competence is a very important aspect of any relating to the environment, the capacity to produce desired outcomes; relatedness is a different name for social belongingness; and autonomy is the metanecessity of the level of personal existence.’
(Leontiev, 2012, p. 22)

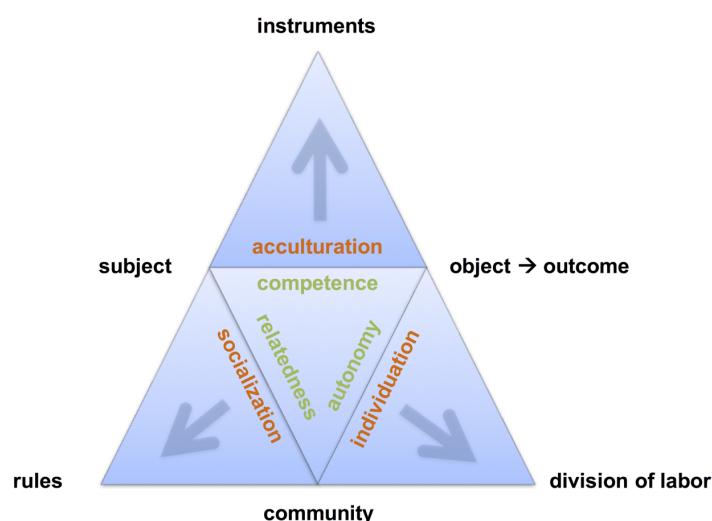
It is important, though, to mention that Deci and Ryan do not define their basic psychological needs on such an existential level. The authors (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 229) identify competence, relatedness and autonomy as ‘*innate* psychological nutriments that are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being’ (accentuation added). Each of these needs is vital for optimal development, and none can be thwarted without significant negative consequences.

Viewing those basic psychological needs as existential metanecessities, however, allows us to go beyond the individual and describe these as need dimensions, and even as dialogic spaces, orienting humans towards an objective world (biological existence), the others (social existence) and the self (personal existence). As such, they are not only abstract need forms, but also unfold in object-oriented activity and are to be recognised as concrete needs in their cultural-historical dimensions, in both their individual and collective forms (Fraser, 1998). In concrete, object-oriented collective activity, e.g. in taking part in a football match or performing music in an ensemble, these abstract dimensions acquire concrete cultural and historical forms.

Needs and activity thus are closely related and thoroughly intertwined (see also Bratus' & Lishin, 1983).

In concrete school activity, these need dimensions become visible as societal or collective as well as individual demands for acculturation, socialisation and individuation (Lamm, 1976; Egan, 2008), or as domains in which education *functions* as qualification, socialisation and subjectification (Biesta 2015, p. 8). In both their individual and collective forms, these need dimensions pull in different directions, potentially conflicting with each other, which has been described by Lamm (1976) as *conflicting theories of instruction*, by Egan (2008, pp. 9–37) as *different and incompatible conceptual idea-lenses concerning education*, or by Biesta (2015, p. 10), although seeing possibilities for synergy, as '*the three domains of educational purpose [that] pull us as educators in slightly (and sometimes significantly) different directions*'. In Figure 1 these individual and collective need dimensions discussed in the field of education are mapped unto a general system of collective human activity (Y. Engeström, 2015, p. 63).

Figure 1. Existential need dimensions mapped unto an activity system



Reflective practice – especially in the field of education – requires considering these needs, and recognising their conflicting potential arising from culturally and historically constituted school change. Hence, I suggest that the integration of these individual and collective, abstract and

concrete existentialist need dimensions into the above discussed existentialist framework for reflective practice is highly appropriate in the field of education.

Collective reflective practice and transformative agency

Taken together, these existentialist concepts and considerations provide a comprehensive framework for a reflective practice that looks beneath the surface and beyond the local situation, views human existence as continuous flux, reaches beyond the individual, strives for meaning, is critical of the unconscious, includes past and future dimensions, and broaches the issue of needs.

I have pointed out the relations between these concepts and positions taken in cultural-historical activity theory, especially the principle of double stimulation, and the principle of the ascent of the abstract to the concrete. These have been proposed as suitable and complementary methodological approaches for fostering a reflective practice that reveals a *transformative disposition, the potential to actively change a situation from the perspective of understanding such reflection as necessary and complementary internal part of the activity, in contrast to merely pausing for thinking.*

Such a transformative disposition added to reflective practice provides fertile soil for the outcome of expansive learning, the emergence of *transformative agency*, which Virkkunen (2006, p. 49) defines as ‘breaking away from the given frame of action and taking the initiative to transform it’. Haapasaari and Kerosuo (2014, p. 4) state that

‘[w]ithin activity theory, agency is seen as embedded in object-oriented activity. Agency appears in actions, and it develops in historically shaped collective activity systems, tightly connected to the motives and contradictions within them. Transformative agency is about working with the contradictions of an activity system. It includes actions of questioning the status quo and of search for new possibilities. Although initiated by individuals, agentic actions gain their meaning, their consequences and their continuity in the interplay between individuals and their collective. In this sense, agency is collectively produced and maintained.’

Reflective practice, informed by and built upon these premises, turns into transformative agency, and vice versa: formative interventionist methodology, as introduced above, promotes the

emergence of reflective practice with a transformative disposition.

4. A case at hand: Towards a more reflective teacher team

The above theoretical considerations guided the present study and partly evolved in these processes of studying teachers' reflective practice. The research site was a small secondary school in Austria, as it was transformed into a new type of secondary school in the course of a nationwide school reform. The study was designed after the Change Laboratory (CL) method which is an application of the theory of expansive learning and thus displays formative intervention methodology (for a thorough introduction, see Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013).

The method encompasses a more or less cyclic movement through expansive learning actions, such as *questioning* and *analysing* a given practice and its developmental contradictions, and *modelling*, *testing*, *implementing*, *reflecting* and, finally, *consolidating* a new, culturally more advanced form of this practice (Y. Engeström, Rantavuori, & Kerosuo, 2013). A CL typically consists of 6–10 sessions that are a few weeks apart.

In the present study, which took place over a period of roughly two academic years, nine school development conferences (sessions) were at least partly designed in the manner of the CL method. The data were collected mostly prior and in between those sessions because neither video nor audio recording (which is typical in CLs) was possible in the conferences. The absence of recorded data also led to the use of several different types of data gathering. Data included narrative interviews with members of the teacher team (which I am also part of, and have been part of, for nearly three decades); self-reflective reports from the teachers concerning their motivation for becoming, and still being, teachers; an online questionnaire (a translation of Deci and Ryan's *Basic Psychological Needs at Work Scale*); interviews utilising *Ultimate Meanings Technique* (UMT), a special interview technique aimed at revealing structural aspects of the participants' worldviews (Leontiev, 2007); relevant Austrian legal texts (from 1774 onwards); the current documents concerning the new secondary school; and newspaper articles that triggered discussion in the staff room.

In what follows the case is presented from the perspective of answering the question how reflective practice can be conceived as something that extends beyond the individual teacher and incites teachers to commit to both individual and professional development. An actualisation of the existentialist framework for reflective practice combined with a CHAT perspective (see Table 1) is described in Table 2 as moves through the cycle of expansive learning. The table provides also an overview and timeline of the conducted sessions.

Table 2. Timeline of the interventions/expansive learning actions

Time frame	Expansive learning action	Data/mirror material
Academic year 2013/2014	Questioning	Self-reflective reports from participants concerning their initial and current motivation for becoming, and still being, a teacher; basic psychological needs scale (online survey); narrative interviews with teachers, present and former headmaster, and teacher students
Oct 2014 session 1	‘school development day’; questioning	Discussion of existential need dimensions, educational demands; construction of school activity system with integrated need dimensions
Dec 2014 session 2	Conference; questioning and analysing	Discussion of school activity system and of available feedback from other schools
Winter semester	Analysing	Discussion and analysis of current state and historical developments – historical legal texts concerning school
Mar 2015 session 3	Conference; questioning and analysing	Questioning and challenging the old school profile: mismatch between school profile and educational guidelines of new school type; contradictory educational needs on both personal as well as institutional levels
May 2015 session 4	Conference; modelling, analysing	Beginning modelling new school guidelines; discussion of individual worldviews that lie at the bottom of our teacher identities
Oct 2015 session 5	‘school development day’; modelling	Introduction of UMT; individual interviews; modelling new school guidelines
Dec 2015 session 6	Conference and on-the-job-training (2 days); modelling	Introduction of new secondary school in an on-the-job training seminar; educational and organisational aspects: team teaching; grading; organisation of parent-teacher conferences
Feb 2016 session 7	Conference analysing and modelling	Evaluation of UMT interviews; discussion of individual worldview orientations and new school profile, providing a more balanced view of the educational need dimensions
Apr 2016 session 8	Conference; implementing	Final discussion of and decision about the new school profile
May 2016 session 9	Conference; testing in live mode	Discussing practical implementation steps; ongoing process of implementing and consolidating

As seen in Table 2, before the start of CL sessions I made an online survey and interviewed my colleagues about their views concerning the school reform and further development of the school. Already this phase is regarded an intervention to teachers' consciences in which they are active in voicing and making public their often hidden experiences and thoughts. These data were used in the first CL session ('school development day') as mirror material for constructing the first stimulus, that is, a task or problem space for the participating teachers as a team. In the first session, the participants confronted the distinction between stability and possibility knowledge which both are necessary for developing transformative agency. As some of the teachers already look back on long and successful professional careers, many expressed interpretations of the school reform and a certain reluctance towards the change: *'Why should we want to reinvent the wheel?'* was a frequent statement. Top-down school development was regarded as a constraint: *'We are pressed to move in that direction now, with the new secondary school, or do we feel pressed?'* Some, though, started considering what might be possible and began to view the system as open to change, and even became concerned with this reluctance to change. As one colleague put it, *'we have become rigid and inflexible'*.

Connected to discussions of the teachers' reflective accounts of their own motives and visions, I introduced in session 1 (see Table 2) the activity system model and a model of existential need dimensions mapped unto this system (see Figure 1) as the second stimuli for analysing the school activity. Second stimuli represent analytical means, often theory-laden, proposed as a tool for working on the problematic task (the way we are looking at the problem, ways of interpreting the world). The deliberate choice of a second stimulus at the same time acknowledges the impossibility of not applying an interpretive lens, of seeing without interpreting. As such, the second stimulus also turns into a sign in the Vygotskian sense by becoming a means of internal activity aimed at mastering oneself. Second stimuli, thus, are oriented at both the problematic situation (external activity) and the people reflecting on it (internal activity). From a sense-making vantage point, the models can be seen to function as sign-creating and common ground anchors for contextualising multiple practice-bound

experiences of individual teachers. In a joint activity, they perform an interactive function of collective reflection (see R. Engeström, 2009, p. 271).

Backed up by interview data, the focus shifted in the subsequent sessions and discussions (session 2 and winter semester) on contradictory educational need dimensions. These dimensions became evident as contradictory societal demands, as one teacher framed it: *'The claim of the school [is] to address everyone individually, but then, everybody should reach the same level, reach the same standards – and at the same time they should be (treated) individually, how can that be accomplished? You can virtually hear trouble here.'* Historical analyses of legal texts concerning institutionalised education proved that different educational need dimensions moved to the foreground at different times and became evident as different societal demands (acculturation, socialisation, individuation). This was also reflected in the old school profile (a representation of the school's guiding principles, negotiated by the teacher team), which now could be seen as a 'child of its time'. At the same time, the examined need dimensions became also visible on a personal level, as different orientations of the individual teachers towards one or the other educational purpose (qualification, socialisation, subjectification). Both on institutional, personal and professional levels, the teacher team became aware of their collective activity system, as well as their individual personalities, as being *shaped by sedimented meanings of culture*, as predicated in the existentialist framework.

The old school profile mainly represented the acculturation/qualification and socialisation dimensions, while relatively neglecting the dimension of personal existence (autonomy/subjectification), which also mirrored the past personal experience of many colleagues as they went through formal education. In the course of the cycle, I utilised UMT interview technique in which the teachers interviewed each other in dyads, applying the UMT method (session 5, see Table 2). The teachers produced one or two interviews per dyad within the given time and took notes as instructed. These notes were transferred by me into an online mind mapping software (mindmeister.com), which allowed for visualising the outcomes as 'meaning trees', as guided by the technique (on the method in more detail, see Leontiev, 2007).

The focus of the discussions (from session 5 onwards, see Table 2) shifted on analysing the underlying individual and collective *worldviews* from the perspective of educational need dimensions. The interviews revealed the different orientations of the individual participants towards one or the other need dimension, which, once acknowledged, not only in part explained the contradictions within the activity system (the conflicting and incompatible idea-lenses as described in Section 3, as well as the comparative neglect of the personal dimension in the old school profile), but also provided a first step towards a possible solution. The teacher team began to see these different individual orientations as potential that had to be reflected in an updated school profile that would represent the educational purposes more equally.

After deciding about such a new school profile in session 8 (see Table 2), the last decision made in the course of the cycle concerned the life span of this updated profile: In light of the new understanding, and as an expansive learning action of *consolidating*, it was agreed that the new guidelines should be subject to frequent evaluation and, if necessary, adaptation. Overall, the moves through the cycle of expansive learning included historical and empirical analyses that, together with new conceptual tools (models) that were partly created during the interventions, unearthed contradictory existential need dimensions and paved the way for modelling the new and more equally balanced school profile for helping to guide educational activity and transform educational practice in the school. Recalling the definition of transformative agency framed by Haapasaari and Kerosuo (2014, p. 4), such agency began to emerge once the teacher team could question the status quo and switched to future-oriented and possibility knowledge mode.

5. Discussion

In this article, I focused on the question of how reflective practice can be conceived of as something that extends beyond the individual teacher and that encourages both individual and collective professional development in educational settings. I addressed this question by discussing the existentialist approach towards reflective practice as proposed by Thompson and

Pascal (2011), by showing the compatibility of its existential key positions with CHAT methodology and by extending that framework with existentialist need dimensions. In the provided case, a thorough analysis of existential need dimensions, and the application of the principles of double stimulation and the ascent from the abstract to the concrete helped to reconceptualise the teachers' activity. The principle of double stimulation, acted out with mirror data, was depicted as a crucial factor for the emergence of a reflective practice that reveals a transformative potential for both the initial (external) activity under scrutiny, as well as for the reflective (internal) activity, and it was interpreted as a germ cell of such reflective practice in general. Finally, it has been shown that reflective practice built on CHAT methodology supports the agents to collectively transform their situation. In other words, it fosters the emergence of transformative agency: Reflective practice and transformative agency go hand in hand in a joint activity.

Biesta (2015) poses the question of how a competent teacher might become a good teacher, and he links the latter to notions of judgement, wisdom and virtuosity. In conclusion, I would like to extend Biesta's question by asking how a competent teacher *team* might become a good teacher *team*. I suggest that, at least partially, this question can be answered by addressing reflective practice as a collective expansive learning process, and by applying formative interventionist methodology in the CHAT tradition.

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